Europe’s continued debt struggles are weighing down the U.S. economy and financial markets, leaving lawmakers frustrated that there is little, if anything, they can do to alleviate the problem.

The worries were evident at several hearings this week as multiple lawmakers probed financial regulators about the nation’s susceptibility to Europe’s debt struggles, including ways Congress could help guard against them. Along with those questions came gripes about what little lawmakers can do to address the situation.

**“One of the frustrations is that we don’t have any control over Europe’s decisions,”** said **Rep. John Campbell (R-Calif.)**
, voicing a typical complaint.
**“Is our financial system sufficiently protected?”**

Lawmakers seem to be stymied in coming up with a way for a domestic legislative body to address a foreign crisis, even as it adversely impacts America’s economy.

No major bills have been introduced this Congress with the intent of addressing Europe’s debt crisis and its impact in America.

One of the few tied to that matter, backed by Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-Wash.), would simply prevent American dollars contributed to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) from being used to help bail out European governments. The measure would protect American dollars contributed to the fund, but do nothing to address the broader crisis.

For the time being, lawmakers are turning to regulators for assurance that the nation’s financial system is being monitored for vulnerabilities.

Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke told lawmakers this week that the Fed and other regulators were actively supervising domestic banks for excessive European exposure, and the central bank was prepared to provide liquidity to the banking system as needed. He added that since the last crisis, banks have built up better capital padding to weather future troubles.

But if a European government were to suffer a sudden, disorganized default, its effects could spill over to America.

“If there was a disorderly default that led to, for example, runs to other sovereigns or stresses to European banks, it would create a huge amount of volatility that would have a very substantial impact not only on our financial system, but on our economy,” he said before the Joint Economic Committee.

“It’s a very, very serious risk if that were to happen.”

That the U.S. economy already is being affected was underscored by market gyrations on Friday.

Financial markets spent the first half of the day in positive territory, buoyed by a jobs report from the Labor Department that exceeded expectations.

However, early in the afternoon, stocks took a steep nosedive into negative territory. The major culprit? FitchRatings downgraded the debt of both Italy and Spain, knocking the latter down two notches amidst concerns of slow economic growth and high debt levels.

While the U.S. economy is hardly humming — only 103,000 jobs were added in September, and half of those were Verizon workers returning from a strike — the problems in Europe have sucked confidence from the economy and Wall Street.

At the end of September, the U.S. stock market closed out its worst quarter since the depths of the 2008 financial crisis. And while the debt-limit fight, subsequent downgrade of the nation’s credit rating, and continued concern about the momentum behind the economic recovery have all played contributing roles, Europe’s debt drama is front and center on most trading floors.

Bernanke told frustrated lawmakers there's not much the U.S. can do.

"Unfortunately…we're kind of innocent bystanders here," he said. "I don't have any good suggestions other than to support [Europe's] efforts and to continue to push them."

Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner was probed by lawmakers Thursday for possible ways they could act. Senate Banking Committee Chairman Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) asked Geithner what policies Congress could pursue to limit Europe's impact on America's economy.

But again, direct solutions were hard to come by.

"We can't want it more than they do. We can't compel them to act," said Geithner.

He echoed Bernanke in saying regulators were keeping a close eye on how financial institutions back home might be exposed to Europe. But other than that, the main thing Congress can do to avoid Europe's economic problems is address its own, Geithner said.

"That's our best protection, as always," he said.

Later in the same hearing, Geithner had to assure lawmakers that U.S. banks were not in danger of failure due to European struggles.

When asked if Morgan Stanley or another major financial institution could be brought down by the sovereign debt crisis, he replied, "Absolutely not."